

## ROMANIA AS TOURISM DESTINATION – AN EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVE

Associate Professor Ph.D. **Carmen Emilia CHASOVSCI**,  
"Ștefan cel Mare" University Suceava, România

Associate Professor Ph.D. **Carmen NĂSTASE**,  
"Ștefan cel Mare" University Suceava, România

Ph.D. **Winfried HILDEBRANDT**

### Abstract

*Only few steps have already been pointed towards bringing Romania at its proper place on the European tourism market. And big challenges are still there, outside, waiting to be settled. Tourism is indeed a very nice sector, but, if we all consider ourselves tourists, it doesn't, necessary, mean that we all know tourism is done. The present paper offers an outside perspective of Romanian tourism; a perspective based on a research done among the German tour operators and reveals some strengths and weaknesses of Romania, as a tourism destination. These points are delivering an original view, through the eyes of foreign tour operators or tourists that visited the country or the destinations within.*

**Key words:** destination, external perspective, strengths and weaknesses of Romanian tourism, sustainable development.

**JEL classification:** L83, O20, Q01.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"Planning and managing the tourist experience" – that can be the key of success in tourism. Unfortunately the day-to-day reality shows that planning is a foreign word for tourism in Romania. We expected since years a master plan for tourism and for sure it will take a lot of years from now, until the stakeholders in tourism will realize the need of planning for a sustainable development.

The planning itself should start with the investigation of tourism motivation or of tourism needs. The experts are stressing this out, in a very convincing way: "One consequence of tourism planning and management is the need to integrate tourist needs and satisfaction to understand how tourism can achieve a sustainable future and sustainable experiences for visitors" (Page, 2006, p.474).

Tourism has great potential as regards the achievement of several major EU objectives, such as sustainable development, economic growth,

employment and economic and social cohesion (Pils, 2004). The tourism industry comprises now in EU some two million businesses, mostly SMEs, which account for about 5 % of both GDP and employment. This figure varies from 3 % to 8 % depending on the Member State. Tourism also generates a considerable amount of activity in other sectors, such as the retail trade and specialized equipment, to a level of around one and a half times that of tourism itself.

Growing sector in EU, tourism should become a growing sector in Romania too. This cannot happen without good knowledge of the clients – tourism willing to come and to spend some time to Romania.

Sometime (and not rarely) the programs developed by Romanian tour operators resemble as they are done in the same way, with same mistakes, and are addressed to all, young or old, Romanian or foreigners, without any particular addressability. Sooner or later, the Romanian tour operators should begin to ask themselves "who are the main consumers of my tourism product?", "which are their expectances?", "are their wishes fulfilled, here, in Romania?".

By finding an answer to these questions (and some other more) and by a joint cooperation of all stakeholders in tourism, the chance of Romania to become an important tourism destination within EU can be reached. The secret of this happening should be a permanent study of tourism request and tourism motivation.

### 2. THE METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Since 1989, right after the revolution, in a way or another, by certain governance or another, tourism was declared as an important factor in raising the GDP and improving economical situation. Declared target was (and still is, now, after 10 years) that tourism will contribute with 10% in GDP.

It is a fact that Romanians are proud about the richness and beauties of Romania. But it is not enough, and the situations are rather far from being very good. For different reasons, Romania is still behind similar countries in Europe.

In order to identify the image that Romania has on the German market, the tourism component of WBF-GTZ Project<sup>i</sup> in Romania, initiated a research among the German tourists and tour-operators (TOPs)<sup>ii</sup>. The purpose of the study was to make an inventory of the weaknesses and the strengths for the tourism in Romania, from an outside view (Hildebrandt, 2005; Chasovschi, 2006), and it was applied in 2005, 2006 and 2007.

The research methodology was based on questionnaire administration. With 28 questions, this questionnaire was sent to 144 tour operators that are selling Romania as tourism destination. The full list of those can be found on the official web page of Romania for the German market: [www.rumaenien-tourismus.de](http://www.rumaenien-tourismus.de). The questionnaire was conceived by dr. Winfried Hildebrandt, GTZ expert, and the notes were between 1 and 6, after the German school scale system, where **1 is the maximum** and **6 is the minimum**.

The answers were very polarizing, with emotion showing an effective involvement of the operators, playing back the positioning of Romania and the USP: *Nature and Culture*.

The questions contained in the questionnaire, direct related to the tourism activities were:

- Were your expectances for the summer fulfilled?
  - For the programs, generally
  - For Romania
- Did you fulfill all the programs for Romania?
  - Will you extend and diversify your programs for Romania?
    - Which new themes are you planning for Romania?
    - Which new destinations in Romania are interesting for you?
    - Are you interested in Info-trips to Romania? Where? Which themes?
    - When should such Info-trips be done?
- Which are your positive / negative comments about Romania?
  - Were your expectations fulfilled? (between 1-6<sup>iii</sup>)
  - Hotels / Overnight stays (between 1-6)
  - Gastronomy / F&B (between 1-6)
  - Nature (between 1-6)
  - Cultural Sightseeing (between 1-6)
  - Strand / See side (between 1-6)
  - Hospitality / personal touch (between 1-6)
  - Incoming Agencies (between 1-6)
  - Public Service (Custom, Public Administration etc.) (between 1-6)
- How do you bring your customers to Romania (plane, train, by their own)

- Which airlines do your customers fly with (Tarom, Lufthansa, Carpatair, Blue Air, others)
- How important are the low cost carriers? (Between 1-6)
- From whom are you expecting further information?
- Which kind of support do you want?
- If the tourism-fairy can fulfill you 3 wishes for Romania, which will be these wishes?

### 3. PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS AFTER THE RESEARCH DONE IN 2005, 2006, 2007

Further on, we will present the most relevant results, in order to stress out the most important items needed to be improved in Romania's tourism.

#### 3.1 Expectances for the summer fulfilled?

The most of the Tour Operators (TOPs) had a good program for the summer of 2005, 2006 and 2007, but some of them (under 10%) found it as inadequate. The causes are connected with the questions that are coming later in the questionnaire and will be discussed further on. Some of the results are showing the weak points and the threats for tourism of Romania. Some of them cannot be controlled by the stakeholders from tourism in Romania, but most of them are depending directly on the human resources and on the will and capacity of Romania to use its chances on the European tourism market, so as other destinations have already done.

#### 3.2 Will you extend and diversify your programs for Romania?

From all interviewed tour operators (TOPs) each year the interest for planning new themes and destinations for Romania was high. This shows a constant interest for Romania.

The new themes to be developed in the future are: *Wine programs, Cultural, hiking, Transylvania, More active holiday tours, Cities, Culture Study Tours, Easy hiking tours, Biking, Danube biking, Wellness, NEW Black Sea cost themes, Family holidays, walking, people contact, Study tours, round trips*.

Some tour operators answered that he is intending to develop not necessary more themes, but more frequency for existing programs (many) and combinations with the countries HU / BG (1).

The new destinations from Romania that would be included into the programs are: *Delta, Delta by Ship (2), Transylvania (2), Bucovina (3), Maramures (2), Cities (1), Seaside (2)*.

The tour operators are opened and willing to see more in Romania, in organized info-tours, to following directions: *Areas for walking tours (many);*

*Cities, Culture, Winter Sports (3); Rural tourism and active holidays (2); Bucovina (5); Maramures (1); Transylvania (5); Delta (1); Wellness (1); All areas in order to gain enough knowledge about the country (4); Walking - Trekking - Culture (1); We want definite offers, not the same question every year (1).*

### 3.3. Structure of client expectations

The majority of answers were “good”, so we can appreciate the client expectations as positive. The average mark was 2,2. Some personal comments of the interviewers were: *Better than expected, positive surprise (2 TOPs); Clients are very satisfied (3); Satisfied when they don't expect too much (1); Great nature, History, Landscape (1); Excellent hiking areas (1); General judgment: 80% very good, 20% good/quite alright (1).*

But not all the expectations were fulfilled. Some of the client expectations were critical, and the reasons are the same, since 10 years with more or less variation: *Very bad roads (2); Price-quality-ratio not always in balance (2); Infrastructure (1); Garbage problems (most); “Seaside” Season too short, no offers (1); Beaches have to become cleaner (058); Not all promises are fulfilled for active tours (103).*

Unfortunately tour operators alone cannot solve a lot of the mentioned problems. Tourism service chain involves a lot of stakeholders. It is not enough that the willing to improve the situation, exists at private level only. Without the support of local and national administration it is difficult, or impossible to solve all the critical aspects mentioned.

### 3.4. Hotels – Accommodation

The next item in the questionnaire was the accommodation; appreciate as good and satisfactory in quite equal shares. As personal comments we can mention: *No problems. Nice and friendly service, very hospitable (many); Mostly better than expected (3); Rather mediocre. Could be improved pretty fast (2); Quite a number being renovated quite well, but others are as they were (1); Not generally a weak point except for some cities with real problems (1).*

The evaluation of accommodation quality was near to the average, with 2,5 (where 1 is very good and 6 is inadequate), similar in all years 2005, 2006 and 2007. The situation is far from being satisfactory for Romania, and actions should be taken in quality of hard and soft components of accommodation services.

The critical opinions were the following: *No adequate price-quality ratio (5 TOPs); Accommodation not always tidy, bad service, breakfast not always good (by far too many); 41% very good, 29% good, 18% quite alright, 3% bad. (1); Partly without proper care, although simple standard*

*is no problem (too many); Partly rather expensive, sometimes bad service, lame and lazy, music too loud, food too cold (2); Staff not always friendly, helpful, need much more training; Service standards have to be improved (4); Varying hotel standard during round trips not acceptable (1); Not sufficient Three Star hotels (1); State owned hotels are top at the bottom (1).*

### 3.5. Eating – Drinking

The gastronomic components reached good points, being appreciate as: *Always great positive reaction (2); Good, but too monotone (1); Well tasting and typical for the country (1); Meals in restaurants by far better than in hotels, which are generally worse (86).*

Despite these favorable opinions, some tour operators mentioned that they love more typical products of the country and the weak quality of breakfast quality in some accommodation structures. Romanian tourism operators, as well the owners or managers of accommodation structure should give more credit to Romanian products. The foreign tourists are coming in Romania searching “the big A”- from “Authentic”: Authentic way of living, Authentic experiences, Authentic traditions and Authentic food (Hildebrandt, 2004). It is quite strange, that in the rural area can be found at breakfast “EU Made in” butter, and not the natural local butter, much tasteful and, for sure, much cheaper. Sometime, in order to become pleasant to the guests, the efforts can be over reacted, but with different results.

### 3.6. Nature

A strong point for Romania it was and still is the **nature**. A very large number of tour operators and tourists are pointed out the nature as an important asset for Romania. The average of evaluation scale was close to **1 (maximum)** in all years of the research.

The most evaluations were like: “unspoiled nature”, “dreamful great”, mostly absolute great reactions. Through all these were also some negative reactions, regarding the less of preoccupation for the infrastructure, for the garbage and rest management, pollution etc.

Unfortunate in Romania the preoccupation for a sustainable environment and for sustainability in tourism remains an issue only for academics and for few Nature Parks and NGOs active in green tourism. Here is a strong need of actions at national and local level in order to become conscious that, if no action is taken, in the future the beauty of Romania's nature will remain only a nice memory.

### 3.7 Cultural Sightseeing

Another strong point for tourism is the *cultural sightseeing*, with a mark of near to 1.

The general opinion concerning the cultural sightseeing is positive, and the offer is seen as very large. Culture as well is a great tourist potential, but: *Should be known much more (1), Absolutely great in Bucovina and Transylvania (2), Very diverse offer, but for individual holiday makers not always easily to reach (1), Better protection of historic monuments (fortified churches and deserted villages) (1).*

### 3.8 Hospitality

Hospitality is another strength with an average mark of 1,5. After the opinion of experts that worked in counselling in tourism for other countries too, such a good evaluation is rare to be found. For the tourism in Romania, this is the most important strengths, and was in the research characterised as: *Great anywhere, ideal (2); Absolutely great and very important (2); Always a highlight (1); as expected (1); is by far the biggest asset of the country (1).*

### 3.9 Incoming Agency

The further point took into consideration in the questionnaire was the working relation with the Incoming Agencies. In this subject, all the answers were split between very good (1%), good (50%) and satisfactory (21%). The comments done by the German tour operators were the following: *Long-term good contacts (2); Unfortunately we do not have an incoming agency (1); Should be more client oriented (1); Should develop better standard for guides (1); Better and reliable bus transport (1).*

The problems mentioned are weak points at national level. The guides that can offer information in a professional, and pleasant way too, are only few. The old-fashion-guide is predominant and in most of the cases the information is presented in a boring way, or, the reverse of this fact, the information is poor and the guides are no advised with the region that they present to the tourists. Another problem is that a lot of incoming agencies from Bucharest are working with guides from Bucharest and not with local guides. In this case, the guides are not so well informed, and the “authenticity of the places” is missing.

We presented the most important issues from the research. Another aspects that should be improved make reference to the public service and frontier (with an average of 3,5) and the transport infrastructure. For example, the airports, especially littoral airports are *far beyond state of the art with annoying and obsolete service (1)*. Also, another opinion is that *Air fares are by far too high, low cost carriers are important (1), Some RO airlines are an absolute disaster spoiling*

*business when it comes to group bookings (3), Unfortunately there is no real alternative on the market – like HU (1), Of utmost importance, because one of the greatest obstacles is to get there a long and expensive journey (1).*

A large number of tour operators mentioned that: *additional support in necessary from Tourism Offices in Germany, RO Amt Info brochures for ALL destinations, in sufficient quantities (3), RO Amt: Permanent automatically info is needed (3), More German groups interested in culture study tours, Fresh info about festivals, events, new offers, new hotels, new situations, e.g. flood, flu, Ro-vigneta.*

The tour operators made also some recommendations. All these can be grouped around few leitmotifs that are coming into discussion many times: Flights to Romania, Information Material and Better performance of stakeholders.

*Flights to Romania:*

• Better travel conditions there for train and flight

- More flights from Germany
- More charter flights to Constanta
- Low cost flights, ideally to Sibiu
- More flight alternatives, more airline offers

*Information Material*

• More info material in sufficient quantities  
• Permanently more, stronger PR Support  
• First class digital photo library for culture and nature

- Sufficient quantities of hotel flyers
- Better image of the country, although this has improved considerably

• Fair prices (1) Keep prices stable  
• First class neutral image brochures for our clients

• Sufficient quantities of regional flyers  
• Up-to date tourism photos from regional

Associations plus calendar of events

*Better performance of stakeholders*

- Reliable stakeholders in the country
- Better performance of stakeholders
- More competence of stakeholders

*Nature*

- Maintain the natural
- Not too many tourists in the Delta
- Keep nature unspoiled
- Better infrastructure in the country
- Chain of rural accommodation for bikers
- Better hotels

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

All this quotes are showing which points should be taken into consideration for those stakeholders that are involved in tourism in Romania. And perhaps all the actions can be synthesised under one sentence mentioned also by a German tour operator: **"People here should not too much admire Western standards, but rather be proud of what they have"**.

All this information presented above is covering the entire chain of tourism services, starting with the information of tourism in his destination, continuing with the chain followed by tourists in making their holidays in Romania. The information should contribute in covering some gaps in Romanian tourism and can be helpful in planning, organising, promoting Romania and the incoming tourism programs.

It is true that is easier to avoid as curing. Romania should stop being a weak country on the tourism market and should take advantage by its own strengths: the beauty of its nature and of its people.

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<sup>i</sup> WBF-GTZ – German Program of Economic Promotion, financed by BMZ – Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

<sup>ii</sup> The presentation of results can be found on [www.forum-turism.org](http://www.forum-turism.org)

<sup>iii</sup> 1 is maximum, 6 is minimum